

*Annual Review of Anthropology*

# China–Africa Encounters: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Realities

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Annu. Rev. Anthropol. 2017. 46:337–55

First published as a Review in Advance on August 7, 2017

The *Annual Review of Anthropology* is online at  
anthro.annualreviews.org

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102116-041531>

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## Keywords

China, Africa, history, ethnography, cultural encounters, interregional mobilities

## Abstract

This review uses multilingual sources to illuminate China–Africa encounters in historical, socialist, and postsocialist contexts. It emphasizes interregional connections over time and uses nuanced ethnographic accounts to complement macrogeopolitical analyses. The article focuses on mutual stereotypes as well as on the negotiation of social and cultural barriers in everyday life. It challenges static, bounded conceptual categories in social science and policy research. The ethnographic studies cited highlight the complexities of human agency and historical legacies on the ground and show the contested democratization of space and opportunities that ensue both when Africans enter Chinese social fields and vice versa. In the process, these examples force us to rethink analytical assumptions about mobility, hierarchy, and political economy in ways that complicate Cold War–derived understandings of both China and Africa.



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## INTRODUCTION

Jack Goody once observed the lack of a culture of flowers in Africa as opposed to the rich floral symbolisms in the arts, literary pursuits, rituals, and practices in China (Goody 1993). He attributed the difference to that between oral and literate traditions, the rise of advanced forms of agriculture, and the associated social/political hierarchies. Goody's approach remained comparative, although he was skeptical of dichotomous views on East and West (Goody 1996). He eventually critiqued Eurocentric and linear views of social change by stressing historical connections and their mutually constituting impact on local society (Goody 2006). Evidence from archaeology and history has, in fact, shown centuries of connectedness between China and Africa, West Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia in the form of trade, tribute, migrations, and cultural and religious exchanges (Abu-Lughod 1991, Brook 2009, Shen 2005, Tagliacozzo 2012, Tagliacozzo & Chang 2011, Wade 2007, Zhang 1963). Knowledge of geography, navigation, and scientific explorations over land and sea between China and the Islamic worlds was also deep (Park 2012). Taking a more nuanced, processual perspective, we challenge the analytical categories of "China" and "Africa" by highlighting crucial junctures of global history that have brought significant structural transformations in a variegated landscape bridging the continental divide (Chaudhuri 1985, Tagliacozzo et al. 2015). Moreover, by uncovering the past in the ethnographic present, we attempt to bring social science and humanities mindsets closer together.

Today, the world sees two historically linked regions moving in a fast-forward mode toward each other. At a geopolitical level, China's global engagement in the postreform era is backed by unprecedented economic resources and political resolve. Chinese activities have intensified in the past decade, colored by the government's relentless push to secure oil, agricultural products, and minerals. State orchestration is visible in the high-profile visits by top Chinese leaders; in contracts to build government headquarters, transnational railways, and ports; and in the positioning of special economic zones linking the eastern coast of Africa (UNDP & IPRCC 2015) with the Persian Gulf and strategic coastal parts of the Indian Ocean such as Gwadar Port in Pakistan (Ahmed 2016, Reeves 2015). One finds new state spaces even in luxury real estate and in the speculative private businesses spearheaded by entrepreneurs from the Wenzhou region in China (Cao 2010, 2012). Business and policy reports point out that the African continent, with its unique mosaic of histories, cultures, ethnicities, human resources, and government structures, is ready for alternative sources of input and strategy (Dollar 2016, Economist 2014, KPMG 2011).

At the micro level, Chinese investors, shopkeepers, and migrant laborers in Africa are estimated at more than one million people. Some stay within secluded work camps, plantations, and mining sites (Lee 2009). Others venture to compete with local farmers in rural and urban markets (Francis & Francis 2010, French 2014, Hessler 2015). Well-connected ones are able to sail across murky political waters to broker unimaginable wealth and influence (Burgis 2014, Levkowitz et al. 2009).

Likewise in Hong Kong, African traders have navigated the dilapidated labyrinth of Chungking Mansions, a hub for those seen as fringe elements in global traveling since the 1960s. Today, this building houses South Asian and African businesses, traders, and asylum seekers. Mathews (2007, 2011) describes their activities as low-end globalization. Many African traders have since moved to urban villages in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, neighborhoods that offer cheap temporary bases of operation (Lyons et al. 2012, Niu 2015). Local media and residents label these areas as "chocolate city," highlighting racial stereotypes. To city officials, these enclaves are illegible (Siu 2007). Officials see a concentration of Chinese migrants and foreign nationals with unfamiliar ethnic and religious markers as doubly problematic in policy terms (Lan 2015). Municipal officials have used various excuses to crack down on overstayers, as during the Ebola outbreak in 2014 (Lau 2014).

To fully capture how macro priorities of global business and nation-states shape and are mediated by microlevel dynamics of community, family fortunes, and individual trajectories, we need to examine how various legacies are recycled in contemporary realities. We believe that ethnographic and historical studies are particularly well placed to elucidate connections and contingencies on the ground and to rethink global processes, be they imperial, colonial, socialist, neoliberal, or post-socialist. We use an interdisciplinary and interregional body of literature to capture the nuances of meaningful lifeworlds in the long process of China–Africa encounters marked by conjunctures and disjunctures. We explore scholarly works, supplemented by quality journalistic reports and Web-based information in English, French, and Chinese.

## HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS OVER LAND AND SEA

A brief survey of Chinese language sources yields rich information on historical connections extending from China to Africa via “West territories” (*xiyu*) and “West Oceans” (*xiyang*). Before the third century (Han dynasty), the routes were mostly over land, but Chinese vessels were already using Sri Lanka and other Indian Ocean ports to connect with traders from the Persian Gulf/Red Sea regions and Northeast Africa (Shen 1990). By the Tang, Song, Yuan, and early Ming dynasties (the eighth to the fifteenth centuries), maritime routes expanded with improved navigation technology and with the trading of bulk goods beyond tribute and elite luxury items (Ronan 1978). Apart from gems, gold, aromatic drugs, resin, ivory, rhinoceros horn, and glassware, commodities included exotic woods, cotton textiles, corals, tortoise shells, and tropical spices. They were traded for Chinese tea, silk, ironware, and porcelain (Zhou 1999). Historian Zhang Guangda (Zhang 2008) sees those centuries as the high point of mutual impact among civilizations spread across continents, in knowledge, in cultural styles (e.g., architecture and furniture, music, dance, clothing, and sports), in religious beliefs (e.g., Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Islam), and in technology (e.g., paper making, gun power, metallurgy, astronomy and navigation, medical sciences).

Changan, capital of the Tang dynasty at one end of the Silk Road that spanned West Asia and Europe, was a cosmopolitan place (Lewis 2009). Moreover, at the empire’s most southern reach, the court established an infrastructure for overseas trade that reached the African continent. Guangzhou was designated as a key port for entry and embarkation. In uncovering a court eunuch Yang Liangyao’s embassy route to the Abbasid Caliphate, historian Rong Xinjiang explains why the envoy chose a sea route from Guangzhou in AD 784. Political instability in the Tibetan region must have been a factor, he says, because a major goal of the embassy was to secure the alliance of the Arabs against Tibetan threats. Guangzhou had become a worldly place with traders, monks, and emissaries of various ethnicities and religions from Persia, India, and Southeast Asia, as observed by a well-known Buddhist monk Jianzhen in AD 748. Yang was hosted by a prefectural governor of Guangzhou, Du You, whose kinsman Du Huan, together with “thousands” of Chinese soldiers and craftsmen, had been captured by the Arabs in a decisive battle near Talas. Huan subsequently traveled for ten years in the Caliphate, including Alexandria and parts of North and East Africa, before returning to Guangzhou on a commercial vessel around AD 762 (Rong 2015, Shen 1990). His travelogue could have been an important source of information for Yang.

Maritime trade blossomed in the Song and Yuan dynasties; officials assumed leading roles and shared profits with multiethnic traders from a rich variety of commodities [Wheatley 2007 (1959), Zhao 1996]. Just as Ibn Battuta headed east from Tunisia in the fourteenth century, facilitated by patrons of pilgrimages and elite Islamic scholars (Dunn 2004), his contemporary Wang Dayuan explored hundreds of islands, their flora, animals, native products, and populations

as he crossed the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to reach the north and east coasts of the African continent [Wang 1981 (1349)]. By then, Quanzhou (Zaitun) became a competitive trading port for the Indian Ocean and the Islamic worlds. Its sizable ethnic neighborhoods with bazaars and mosques thrived and declined with the political fortunes of the city's Mongol elites (Chaffee 2008). In the fourth and fifth trips across the Indian Ocean, the fleet of the Muslim eunuch-admiral Zheng He brought exotic animals from the east coast of Africa for the Ming emperor Yongle. The gifts included a giraffe (via the king of Bengal), visualized by the painting and poem of Shen Du, who equated the animal to the *qilin*, a mystical animal in Chinese worldview (Peterson & Ammann 2013). The gift was timely and auspicious, as the emperor was assured by his loyal official that the nephew from whom he usurped the throne was nowhere to be found. Around the time when the Manchus overran the Ming dynasty to set up its own dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century, a powerful sea lord based in the coastal province of Fujian (Zheng Zhilong) was known to have 500 brave "Black Guards," ex-African slaves turned mercenaries whom Zheng had most likely recruited from the Portuguese colony of Macao (Ho 2011).

The continental divides such as "China" or "Africa" and regional constructs today might have appeared as continuous land masses and seascapes in Chinese historiography, treated with varying strategic importance in trade and diplomacy and presented with a mosaic of cultural/ethnic/religious alterity (Hansen & Curtis 2013, Millward 2007, Shen 1990, Smith 2009). Chinese descriptions of the populations encountered were marked by curiosity and condescension, with terms such as *yi*, *fan* (outsiders), and *man* (uncivilized). Violence against foreign communities did occur, but abundant official collusion, fluidity in institutional boundaries, and cultural hybridity marked the encounters between state agents and among the common people across the divides.

The density of activities and prolonged exposure have resulted in various views of the cultural other. Historical records of "Africans" appeared before the Han dynasty, although the origins of these peoples were left ambiguous (Li 2015). Historian Don Wyatt uses both Chinese and Western sources to trace changing images through the centuries, highlighting the intertwined impact of local social dynamics, multiethnic long-distance trade, transnational diplomacy, and dispositional discourses in historical records. *Kunlun* was used to identify a range of "dark color" people most likely from the Malaysian peninsula. They could be loyal slaves, fearless mercenaries, and skilled seafarers, kept and exchanged by Arab merchants who dominated the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian routes from the eighth through the fifteenth centuries (Wyatt 2010). Julie Wilensky's (2002) exhaustive reading of Chinese historical writings from the Han to the Ming adds more layers and details to the changing images of *kunlun* as the Chinese encountered them in trade, in imperial courts, and in domestic circumstances. In fiction and nonfiction, individual *kunlun* characters assumed almost mystical prowess and skills.

By the Ming Dynasty (fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries), the Inter-Asian scene had changed radically. The trips of Zheng He put Chinese officials and explorers in direct contact with seafaring African populations (Curtin 1984, Middleton 2004). They subsequently presented to the Chinese court native chiefs from kingdoms along the East African coast as trade partners and tributary subjects without overt geographic markers or racialized overtones. Derogatory attitudes existed, triggering emotions from disdain to cultural inferiority to fears of savagery. How these images became fixated with Africans might have resulted from transatlantic slavery in the ensuing centuries marked also by various forms of European colonialism and global capitalist expansion that staged a global hierarchy of development and backwardness (Chakrabarty 2000, Cohn 1996, Ferguson 2006, Mitchell 2000, Trouillot 2003, Wyatt 2010).

On the African continent, another space of racial heterogeneity was the territory that became the Republic of South Africa. The Chinese presence began in 1660 as several Chinese were sent

to the Dutch Cape Colony. Their number increased massively with the arrival of some 64,000 indentured laborers brought there between 1902 and 1910 (Bright 2013, Yap & Man 1996). These so-called “coolies” worked in the gold mines in the period immediately after the Anglo-Boer war, when the victorious British faced a shortage of both black and white laborers. This all-male Chinese labor force caused a moral panic among South Africa’s white population, leading to their repatriation in 1910. An interesting direction of inquiry is how processes of mutual dependence and othering changed through the twentieth century to inform multiethnic encounters today.

## POSTCOLONIAL AND SOCIALIST LEGACIES IN AFRICA AND CHINA

The first half of the twentieth century saw little interaction between China and the various colonies that constituted most of the African continent. By the 1950s, anticolonial struggles and the subsequent rise of postindependence and socialist states in Africa and Asia fundamentally changed the dynamics of China–Africa relations. To forge a breakthrough in a world order marked by Cold War politics after the Second World War, an isolated socialist regime under Mao sought new allies through diplomacy, ideological persuasion, and strategic aid. China’s Africa policy competed with aid from the Nationalist Kuomintang-dominated government in Taiwan and advocated a spirit of socialist brotherhood during the 1960s and 1970s (Liu 2009; Monson 2009, 2013; Slawewski 1963; Zhang & Hu 2009). China was clear about its intentions and maneuvers to gain political allies. Considering that many postcolonial African nations experimented with various socialisms, Tanzania’s Ujamaa being a notable form (Lal 2015), one should assess China’s socialist legacies in these countries’ transformations.

One of the core principles of China’s socialist-era interventions in Africa was to provide support without impinging on the sovereignty of young African nations. As a country that itself had experienced the heavy weight of imperialism, the Chinese government was attuned to African sensitivities on this point. This approach set the Chinese apart from Soviet and other European communists, who were often keen to meddle in African countries’ internal affairs as part of their own policies of cultivating satellite states, just as the capitalist ex-colonial bloc did. The 1,860-km-long TAZARA Railway was both a symbolic and a material instantiation of this policy. The railroad, built between 1968 and 1975, allowed Zambia, one of the socialist frontline states that opposed the apartheid South African state, to export its copper ore. South Africa had successfully worked with its Portuguese colonial allies to prevent Zambia from using any southern African ports. TAZARA broke the blockade and indirectly helped to support liberation movements in Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia as well as South Africa. Monson (2013) has shown how China, Tanzania, and Zambia, three young socialist countries, aimed to form a cohort of “new men” who would be “formed through pedagogies of work that emphasized practical training, exhortation, and role modeling” (p. 48).

China also built stadiums and public buildings in other socialist countries such as the Republic of Guinea. Despite the rhetoric of socialist mutual engagement, the techniques and equipment used for all these projects were proprietary, and the Chinese did not always teach their African workers all the affiliated technologies. In other cases, countries jettisoned Chinese-trained personnel in favor of new employees who might have higher levels of formal education but less practical knowledge about the systems—such as the TAZARA railway—they were hired to run. This practice led to difficulties in upkeep. For the fortieth anniversary of the construction of the Dar es Salam railway station, Chinese engineers and workers had to come to Tanzania to refurbish the building. The same happened in 2008 when China agreed to renovate Guinea’s Chinese-built national legislature building for the country’s fiftieth anniversary of independence and had to send Chinese workers to do the work (McGovern 2009, p. 17).

Despite these complications, the socialist period created a deep reservoir of goodwill toward China in many African countries, even ones that did not benefit from major Chinese infrastructure projects. When China returned after 2000 to engage with Africa, many Africans took Chinese promises to provide mutually beneficial assistance without interference in domestic politics as a continuation of earlier policies. Many Euro-American commentators decried this policy as a cynical exchange of raw materials for political cover for African dictators, using Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and Northern Sudan's Omar al-Bashir as examples. Although there may have been some truth to this criticism, it was not representative of Chinese engagement in all African countries, and it demonstrated an underestimation of the legacy of socialist-era cooperation for many African citizens.

## AFRICA IN CHINA'S LATE SOCIALIST ENGAGEMENTS

Chinese politicians and diplomats are keen to draw a straight line between the Cold War-era South-South solidarity of China with various African countries and their contemporary interventions. Western commentators tend to treat such claims skeptically, even ironically. An anthropological perspective on interactions between Africans and Chinese suggests a strong element of geopolitical self-interest crosscut by a commitment to sharing a political economic formula that has produced rapid economic growth in China. Since China receded from the ideological extremes of Maoism to embark on market reforms and a degree of openness, the regime's global engagement has been based increasingly on economic prowess. However, the socialist state is firmly in control (Alden 2007, Davies 2008, Yao 2009, Zhang 2002). The visits of Presidents Hu and Xi to Africa have highlighted China's rhetoric and pragmatism, which are similarly made explicit by China's One Belt One Road agenda and by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2013. It is remarkable that these projects reassemble the "silk roads" (overland and by sea) that originated in the cosmopolitan Tang dynasty (600–900 CE). Although China's main motive is to export her excess production capacity to countries across Asia and the Middle East, China has separately embarked on heavy infrastructural investment in Africa in return for much needed commodities, markets, and political influence (Economist 2016, Wong 2016). Efforts to culturally reshape the existing global order in line with a nationalistic resurgence (*shengshi*) are also intensified to promote Chinese language and education (Ferdjani 2012, Niu 2014, Xu & Zheng 2011).

For the African continent, statistics from China's Commerce Ministry show bilateral trade growing at 28% per year in the past decade. Its value topped US\$114 billion in 2008, surpassing the United States as Africa's largest trading partner in 2009 (Wei 2012b). In 2014, Chinese government figures listed the volume as US\$221.9 billion. China's direct investment also increased rapidly. It reached US\$3.4 billion in 2013. The China-Africa Development Fund (<http://www.cadfund.com/en>) was established in 2007 with a target of US\$5 billion to support China's investments and to strategically build markets for its goods, skilled labor, and political influence.

China's investments in Africa have drawn both praise and criticisms in Western and African media. In her book *The Dragon's Gift*, Brautigam (2009) puts China investments in the best possible light. Official Chinese media and some scholarly discussions continue to highlight a history of China's friendship toward her African partners. They also emphasize how China's development path out of agrarian poverty is a more appropriate model for African countries than the model prescribed by European and North American countries, the wealth of the latter having been built out of the illegal expropriation of land and resources in the colonies and stolen slave labor (Hsu 2008; Li 2015; Monson 2004, 2009, 2013; Ran 2015; Wei 2012a). Others focus on showing the



failures of Western aid and investments and the fallacies of pro-Western media (Moyo 2009, 2012; Sautman & Yan 2007). Some have considered China's remarkable resources as a possible boost to African development (Ferme & Schmitz 2014, Gadzala 2015, Lombard 2006, Rupp 2008; see also <http://www.sais-cari.org/>).

Critics, however, argue that Chinese investments have concentrated in countries with commodities to extract, and infrastructural investments have aimed to facilitate China's import needs rather than supporting a balanced and integrated regional growth strategy (African Dev. Bank 2011, Sanusi 2013, Wood 2013). Although technology transfer and training come with investment, many state-affiliated Chinese enterprises hire and pay their workers in China, thus limiting the flow of knowledge and financial resources to the African hosts (Ng 2014). Some authors argue for "reinserting African agency into China-Africa relations" and challenge the stereotype of Chinese enterprises not hiring Africans (Mohan & Lampert 2013). Still, the authors write, "[I]n most of the 85 Chinese enterprises we studied in Ghana and Nigeria, a substantial proportion, and often the majority of the workforce was African," which is somewhat underwhelming, especially in light of Ghana's and Nigeria's governments' requirement that foreign companies hire local workers. Ultimately, when China's own economy showed signs of slowing in 2015, and its overseas engagement was curbed by other policy agendas, her African partners were left vulnerable (Bradsher & Nossiter 2015, Onishi 2016).

Scholarly debates have focused largely on the nature of a state-led model of development and East-West comparisons (Y. Chen 2008, Z. Chen 2010, Davies 2008, Larmer 2017, Rupp 2008, Strauss 2009, Strauss & Saavedra 2009). Large-scale mining and agribusiness projects promise to have major consequences for the Chinese economy and for various African national economies. Angola, for instance, is China's number two provider of oil. China relies on this supply just as Angola expects China to be a steady consumer and to provide diplomatic insulation from demands for greater financial transparency and civil liberties. Similarly, rapidly increasing land deals in Madagascar and elsewhere suggest a future where China may rely on agricultural production in Africa for its own food security (Buckley 2011; Economist 2012, 2011; Pearce 2012; Wang 2010; Zagema 2011). Chinese scholarly research on policy concerns has already pointed to problems in land acquisitions and labor management when Chinese enterprises have little understanding of the complex norms of land ownership and use, as well as labor practices, in African societies. These studies, in a self-critical tone, stress sensitivity to local cultural and legal configurations as the basis for project effectiveness (Tang & Song 2015, Zhang et al. 2012).

Environmentalists and wildlife conservationists are alarmed at the devastating impact of Chinese demands for the continent's natural resources and exotic animals. Although public media may blame poaching and illegal traffic of ivory, antlers, and rhinoceros horns on syndicated gangs and Asian consumers, efforts to curb these activities have in fact involved global partnerships that include China (Gao et al. 2016, Gao & Clark 2014, McGrath 2016).

A key concern in this review is to look past dichotomous ordering frames and focus on complex and contradictory human agencies beyond macro geopolitical fanfare and policy blueprints. Journalistic reports show how the drive to build infrastructure displaces many (French 2005, 2010, 2014; Michel & Beuret 2009; Wagner 2014). Worker unrest and conflict in Chinese-owned mines in Zambia often hit the headlines (BBC 2012), but a comparison of management styles across foreign-owned mines shows Chinese enterprises to be ready to compromise on political calculations (Lee 2014). The energies of ordinary Chinese migrants looking for economic gain and social mobility through work in manufacturing and the service sectors also show that they juggle both entrenched government structures and unrestrained market impulses (French 2014, Harney 2008, Osnos 2014, Siu 2006). The following sections use recent ethnographic studies to demonstrate the importance of nuanced observations on the ground.

## AFRICAN-CHINESE ENCOUNTERS AS A SPACE OF CONTESTED DEMOCRATIZATION

Many of the macrolevel reports on African interactions with China emphasize the economic facets of this relationship. As is true elsewhere, what can be quantified in aggregate as a series of statistics is visible at the everyday level as a web of value-laden decisions that anthropologists are well placed to explore. One sector where this is evident is that of West African textiles (Prag 2013; Sylvanus 2009, 2013). For most of the twentieth century, West Africa's most sought-after textiles were produced in northern Europe (especially the Netherlands) and imported via a female trade oligopoly based in Lome, Togo. The Nana Benzes, as these powerful, Mercedes-owning women are known, began losing their monopoly first as a result of neoliberal free trade reforms introduced by the Togolese government in the mid-1990s. Around the same time, West African entrepreneurs first traveled to Hong Kong to commission Chinese versions of the European-produced cloth. One of the first of these traders, Antoinette Mensah, describes how she had to convince the Chinese producers that "[h]er concern for her profit margin did not mean that she would accept goods that were shoddy or cheap" (Sylvanus 2013, p. 72). After a period during which her trade in Chinese-produced textiles brought her great wealth, she found that the producers began selling their goods to other distributors and eventually moved into the West African market themselves, undercutting their erstwhile middlewomen. Having imparted to her former Chinese partners a great deal of knowledge about West African women's tastes and preferences, she now feels betrayed by "Chinese devils" who have rejected a division of labor formerly respected by European producers.

The West African textile sector exemplifies what Guyer (2004), Roitman (2005), and others have pointed out, that much economic activity in Africa involves unequal distributions of knowledge and other symbolic capital. Profits derive from the ability to leverage the control of passage across thresholds that are socially constructed but become economically relevant because of the relationships, knowledge, and skill required to bridge them. Such economic logics facilitate gatekeeping and also the cultivation of clients, protégés, and apprentices as "wealth-in-people" (Guyer 1993). The entry of Chinese businesses into African economies has broken many of the previously unspoken cultural rules of African trade, sometimes by disregarding these thresholds. In many African countries, a primary source of complaint against Chinese businesspeople is that they enter into areas considered inappropriate. The story of Chinese women sitting in the market, taking up a table next to other women selling tomatoes or onions and selling the same vegetable at a slightly reduced price, is one that has been offered to the authors in multiple countries as proof of the illegitimate depths to which Chinese are willing to go to penetrate African economies.

One such area, described by Ndjio (2009, 2014), is the provision of sexual services in Douala, Cameroon. Chinese women recruited from Fujian, Guangdong, and Zhejiang provinces for factory or other work find themselves forced into sex work. Chinese sex workers in other African countries are often intended first to service expatriate Chinese workers but have also become popular with African customers. Ndjio (2014) describes the "sex war" that has taken place between Chinese and Cameroonian sex workers in Douala since about 2000. The arrival of Chinese competitors undercut the livelihoods of their Cameroonian peers, which was a result of the novelty of the immigrants and also because Chinese women were willing to undercut the standard rates for their services. This price competition forced the Cameroonian sex workers to lower their prices. It also changed the demographics of formerly middle-class red light districts in Cameroon to ones where poorer men could now access formerly out-of-reach services.



Cameroonian sex workers responded by treating the Chinese “sexual colonization” as a form of occult economy (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). Accusing the Chinese women of using witchcraft and of draining their clients of life force, sometimes leaving them dead, the Cameroonians also called on their male compatriots to practice “sexual patriotism” (Ndjio 2014, p. 382). Such logics were one way of making sense of a situation in which “the propensity of Chinese business migrants to compete even with the most socially and economically marginalized groups in Cameroon has induced a mounting sentiment among sections of the local population that they have moved from a Western Scylla to an Eastern Charybdis” (p. 381).

A final line of criticism of Chinese sex workers by their Cameroonian counterparts was that the Chinese women’s bodies were *baba*, or “fake” (Ndjio 2014, p. 384). Less a criticism of anything actually characterizing the Chinese women than an attempt to extend to them a common criticism of Chinese goods, it draws on a continent-wide discourse of the African encounter with China that criticizes Chinese manufactured goods as cheap knockoffs of European, Japanese, and American goods. Sylvanus describes Togolese debates around *kpayo* (fake) goods, including printed fabric, much of it initially introduced to African consumers as the European counterfeits of Indonesian batik patterns, but increasingly copied and more cheaply produced in China. Sylvanus (2012) argues that, historically, “the distinctions between authentic and fake that define proprietary goods in Togo are much more fluid and part of a changing field in which the construction of what counts for authentic and fake are socially defined and always contested” (p. 241). The recent influx of Chinese textile copies thus throws into relief long-standing questions surrounding authenticity, ownership, and value. Nevertheless, the perception that Africa is a dumping ground for goods of inferior quality remains a point of contention, even for those who might not be able to afford better-quality goods. As one man from Lesotho put it, “People complain about shoes from Chinese shops. They are low quality. Feet ache. But they [continue to] buy them because they are cheaper” (Park 2013, p. 139).

The interplay of economics, intimacy, and quotidian experience of inexpensive Chinese imports is visible through people’s use of Chinese motorbikes all over the continent (Wasamu 2016). This process, which picked up momentum after 2000, has made motorcycles available to a far greater number of Africans than was possible when most motorcycles were imported from Japan. The transport revolution introduced by Chinese motorbikes has changed everyday life as much as the communication revolution created by the introduction of cellular phones and networks during the same period. Motorcycles are China’s number three export to Africa after cotton fabric and footwear (Lambert 2006). Chinese motorbikes typically sell for the equivalent of \$500 to \$800. The Japanese motorcycles they have replaced cost five to ten times as much. Called *boda-bodas* in Kenya and Tanzania, *pan-pans* in Liberia, and *okadas* in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, Chinese motorcycle taxis are used in rural areas to bring agricultural goods to weekly markets, children to school in neighboring villages, and sick people to hospitals. In cities, they have become essential tools for navigating perpetual traffic jams, which is one reason why they are more sought after than (more expensive) automobile taxis in all but the worst rainy-season downpour.

As Degani (2012) has pointed out, this democratization of motorized transport is not without its perceived downsides. Owners constantly complain about premature breakdowns, even while they admit that they could not afford the more expensive Japanese models and are grateful to have found an entry to the market via the cheaper Chinese versions. In a more complicated vein, many Tanzanians blame the cheapness of the Chinese motorbikes for the high rate of injuries sustained by young male riders. As Degani notes, many of these accidents result from the combination of inexperience and risk-taking that characterize young moto-taxi drivers in Dar es Salaam. It is only indirectly the fault of the Chinese manufacturers that their inexpensive bikes have put

these drivers on the road when they might not otherwise be there. Nevertheless, many Africans across the continent appreciate that moto-taxi work has employed large numbers of those young men who experience the highest levels of unemployment, boredom, and sometimes criminality of any sector of African urban populations (Wasamu 2016). This is especially true in a number of postconflict societies, including Liberia and Sierra Leone, where the moto-taxi business is dominated by ex-combatants. These individuals have reintegrated into civilian life via the modest but steady incomes provided by moto-taxi driving (Reno 2010).

The microlevel social and economic dynamics usually studied by anthropologists are still shaped by geopolitical factors. One example is the massive importation of Chinese shoes into southwestern Africa (Namibia and Angola) via Namibia. As Dobler (2008, 2009) describes, China's long-standing support of the Southwest Africa People's Organization liberation party has eased the flow of Chinese goods into postindependence Namibia. Dobler (2008) also describes economic competition among socially heterogeneous Chinese shoe wholesalers. They range "from the son of a peasant who started selling rice as a small side-business twenty years ago to the upper-middle-class son trained at Beijing University business school" (p. 425). He also describes their internal competition: "They buy and sell individually: nobody talks about his suppliers and nobody asks. Much to the dismay of the Beijing MBA, they do not fix prices, but compete with each other, even though cartels would be more profitable" (p. 425).

This scenario is typical of the ethnographically derived research based on extended time spent with Chinese businesspeople resident in African countries. Intra-Chinese competition is often foregrounded, as is the frequent failure of Chinese businesses. Describing Chinese entrants into the West African textile market, Sylvanus (2013) writes, "Competition was fierce, and one manager even received instructions from Shanghai not to mix with other Chinese" (p. 76). She then describes "a dimension of the China-in-Africa story that often is overlooked in the literature—that is, China's relative vulnerability in West African markets . . . [T]he Lome market case. . . puts into perspective the myth of a Chinese assault on West African markets and, by extension, the assumed vulnerability of African societies" (p. 77).

While African consumers and commercial competitors with lower-end Chinese merchants have often had relatively little control over the introduction of Chinese goods into the market, most ethnographic observers have insisted that both producers and consumers have not been passive bystanders (Giese & Marfaing 2015, Mohan & Lampert 2013). Mohan & Lampert describe concerted efforts by Nigeria's robust manufacturing sector to get the Nigerian government to ban the import of cheap Chinese goods, which they argued "was fatally undermining local producers" (p. 107). They succeeded in getting textiles and furniture added to the import prohibition list in 2004. At the same time that these Nigerian manufacturers resisted Chinese incursions, others invited more Chinese activity. Mohan & Lampert describe one Nigerian business owner who had been importing Chinese-made furniture and, after the furniture import ban went into effect, brought Chinese furniture makers to work for him in a factory in Lagos.

Such examples come out of a long tradition of African strategies for social and economic success. African societies have managed uninvited and often unwelcome incursions for at least 500 years. These incursions have introduced new cultural idioms and institutions, ranging from missionary Christianity and Islam to European forms of education and health services. African receptions and uses of these introductions have often included moves by powerful gatekeepers to monopolize them and the symbolic or material capital they provided. They have simultaneously involved complex forms of adoption, reconfiguration, and vernacularization by people of many different social strata. The adoption and uses of Chinese material culture and know-how are not so different from earlier uses of Islam by people of servile status in West Africa to claim equality with their would-be noble superiors during the colonial period (Peterson 2011).

Marfaing & Thiel (2013) describe how market traders in Senegal and Ghana impose restrictive rules of succession and access to capital that effectively bar entry to many aspiring traders. They also show that Chinese entrepreneurs do not explicitly try to open the door for new and different categories of aspiring African merchants to enter the market. Still, their irregular insertion into local socioeconomic networks provides opportunities to would-be African merchants to also enter the market through unorthodox means. One of the openings created by Chinese business owners for aspiring African entrepreneurs is to offer them employment as low-level employees as a way to provide an alternative source of start-up capital. Another is by bringing cheaper commodities into the marketplace, thus lowering the amount of capital required for a small trader to get started without being inserted into the usual kin or patron–client networks that reproduce wealth within most West African markets (Marfaing & Thiel 2013, p. 655). Here again, the most profound effect of the increased presence of Chinese people and goods is to democratize access for Africans, even where this is not an intended outcome. Africans themselves have a range of opinions about these changes, as some find new avenues for self-promotion and others find their former advantages eroded (Sylvanus 2016).

### **PILGRIMAGE TO NEW GLOBAL FRONTIERS: AFRICAN ENTREPRENEURS IN CHINA**

Just as more Chinese citizens are headed to Africa, many more Africans are traveling to China, some for short visits and others to stay. In the heyday of socialism, Africans came to China as diplomats, technicians in training, and exchange students. Except for an occasional flare-up between these Africans and Chinese students, the visitors were not in public sight (Chung 2006). Those who have come to China's big cities in the first decades of the twenty-first century, however, are physically, economically, and culturally visible. Although the career goals of African students are clear, experiences are diverse (Ferdjani 2012). Four African women studying in Beijing started a website to capture their encounters with both the Chinese and their African compatriots who are not cloistered in academic environments (Nontshokweni 2016). Their portrayal highlights “othering” processes from multiple angles. Beijing and Yiwu have sizable African populations, but those in Guangzhou have attracted the most attention. Their presence is felt on the ferries, buses, and trains connecting Hong Kong to the light manufacturing hubs and wholesale markets in Southern China. Mostly West Africans, they frequent wholesale markets on the edge of the city where Chinese- and African-operated shops provide consumer goods for an increasingly affluent urban Africa: shoes, wigs, fashion, cell phones, household appliances, flat screen televisions, computer parts, and air conditioners.

Most visitors congregate in Guangzhou's second-tier transport terminals. They rent cheap housing from farmers in village enclaves whose substandard rental properties are surrounded by office buildings, highways, malls, and luxury apartments (Lan 2005, Li 2004). On Sundays, the bustling clothing and light goods markets in the city frequented by African traders are eerily quiet. Instead, the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, completed by French missionaries in 1888, is packed with African worshippers. After the two-hour service, some gather in a temporary building next to the cathedral to continue with charismatic services similar to the Pentecostal services widespread in Africa. As Haugen (2013) observes, marginalization of African migrants in Guangzhou is closely associated with shifts toward charismatic religious practice. Three of the city's four mosques, with the exception of a historical mosque known as the Guang Ta, are well attended by African traders.

Is the flocking of African traders to Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Yiwu part of a low-end globalization, as Gordon Mathews has described? Some earlier studies would detect a pattern of

entrenched barriers and degrees of disjuncture and immobility characteristic of informal economies (Bodomo 2012, Haugen 2012, Neuwirth 2011, Osnos 2009, Pelican & Tatah 2009). But the scene changes almost by the day. Their Hong Kong-based ventures have long spread beyond Chungking Mansions to used car-part dealers in the more rural part of Hong Kong. In Guangzhou, many African women conduct large-scale businesses that require high-tech information flows, legal maneuvers, container shipping, and transnational banking facilities (Tu Huynh 2016, Xie 2016). Among the shops catering largely to African traders, one finds mixed couples with Mandarin-speaking children going about their daily routines (Castillo 2016, Marsh 2014). The night scenes on the city's edges are particularly vibrant, with African men and women taking up musical performances in clubs and where advertising with a "foreign ethnic" touch has become fashionable for an affluent city (Carli-Jones & Lefkowitz 2015). Min Zhou and her team have provided in-depth sociological studies of these interracial encounters (Zhou et al. 2016a,b), emphasizing the complexities and nuances of cultural exposure.

## CONCEPTUAL MUSINGS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Much of the attention paid to interactions between the African continent and China has resembled the moral panic surrounding the presence of the cohort of unmarried Chinese male laborers in South Africa around 1900. The sudden and visible presence of an "other Other" threatened to destabilize the existing political, economic, and symbolic relationship between Europeans and Africans hashed out over a 500-year period. The reactions ranged from the overly optimistic, in which African intellectuals imagined that Chinese plain-spokenness would be a boon for African societies and economies, to overly alarmist, in which mostly Western commentators warned of imminent damage to government transparency and human rights. The slowing of China's economic growth and the diversification of its economy have already begun to make such hyperbole seem outdated.

It is unclear how long the China boom is going to last for African residents in China (Marsh 2016). As China's own manufacturing and labor regimes are changing, journalist Jenni Marsh (2016) has observed that some resourceful African entrepreneurs are returning home for exciting new ventures. The return migration may point to unforeseen dynamics in the flow of people, goods, and services across the continental divides and generate new cultural encounters. Similarly, one can expect changing profiles of Chinese migrants to Africa. Their diversifying strategies and their circulatory movements challenge migration studies that have been shaped by static and dichotomous views of hosts and sojourners.

We hope to have presented a summary and a research agenda for the China–Africa encounter that parallels well-known anthropological explorations of interregional processes, which stress the mutual construction of seemingly unconnected social formations across continental divides. Recent studies bring nuance to analyses of the social, ecological, and economic impact of Chinese activities on local African communities (Aurégan 2013; Braun 2015; Chappatte 2014; Gabas & Chaponnière 2012; Hessler 2015; Ma 2011; Monson & Rupp 2013; Park 2013; Sylvanus 2013, 2016). Whether exchanges of people, goods, and ideas between Africa and China continue to accelerate or rest at a new plateau, anthropological research will be essential to understanding the sociocultural and micropolitical exchanges taking place at the face-to-face level.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Ning Rundong for his superb compilation of references and formatting skills. Valerie Hansen, Louisa Lombard, Susanna Fioratta, Mike Degani, Adrienne Cohen, Gao Yufang, and Cao Nanlai have generously shared ideas and references over the years. Yale University and the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong kindly provided support for our workshops/trips to China and Africa.

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